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ABSTRACT

Acculturation differences associated with relationship problems were studied with Chinese American immigrant parents and their children. Subjects were 20 Chinese Americans aged 9 to 16 years attending a Chinese church in a city in the mid-southern United States. Most were second generation Chinese Americans. They completed a questionnaire about acculturation modified from one completed by Korean Americans in another study. Parental comments about relationship problems were gathered informally. Over 90% of the young respondents indicated that they were happy living in the United States, that their parents loved them, and that they were happy with school life. Between 70 and 90% wished that their parents spoke English well, and most wished that their parents understood more about them and their feelings. Only 15% wanted to know more about China and its culture, and about 15% wished they were not Chinese. Parents expressed concerns that they did not understand the educational system adequately. They also voiced concerns that their children did not respect them, did not like to converse with them, and did not know about Chinese culture and values. Results demonstrate some acculturation problems. The most extreme negative opinions about culture and ethnic identity were voiced by the most recent immigrants. The acculturation gap appears to be a factor in the parent-child relationship that could have a great impact on the children's adjustment at school. The study questionnaire is attached. (Contains nine references.) (SLD)

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# ACCULTURATION GAP AND RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION CHINESE-AMERICANS

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Introduction and Purpose

Immigrants tend to bring with them their values and life styles as they immigrate and settle in a new country. Their beliefs, conduct codes and communication systems could be very different from those of the new country. For example, Ellinger and Beckham (1997) found that in South Korea the mother is the driving force behind Korean children's unusual high academic achievements. Mothers do not only oversee their children's education but may also go to work or borrow money to provide their children with the best possible education money can buy. This practice of placing education on top of the family agenda is reflected in Park's survey among 365 Californian Korean-American parents. Park (1994) reported that children's excellent academic achievements was the pride of Korean-American parents. Still, 47% of the 363 parent respondents listed education as their foremost concern about their children. Similarity, Holman (1997) asserted that newly arrived Hispanic immigrant families tend to live by their traditional protocol. Children might regard direct eye contact as a sign of disrespect, while the husband may still take a leading role in conferences in the school even though in the home the mother probably takes primary responsibility for school matters.

However, immigrants' children who grow up and attain socialization through schooling in a new land may not adhere to their parents' culture. They tend to acculturate, i.e., adopt the views, customs and behaviors of a new country, at a rate far exceeding their parents and elders. This acculturation gap compounds the ordinary "generation gap" between the first and second generations of immigrants, precipitating tremendous conflicts and communication problems which often disrupt family relationships.

Disrupted relationships can be serious when parents are holding on to their "old" cultural ways or slow in acculturation, whereas their children are adaptive or over-acculturated to the norms of the new land. Misunderstanding and hurt feelings are rampant is such families. Often parents and elders feel perplexed, disappointed, betrayed, or alienated over their children's "strange" values and behaviors. It seems that their sacrifice is in vain, the sacrifice of leaving a familiar environment of the homeland to secure a better future for their children, which is usually a primary motive for immigration to the U.S.A. The younger generation, on the other hand, may become bewildered, embarrassed, disgusted, contemptuous, or even infuriated by the old folks' alienness. Many a time the author has been asked or heard remarks by second generation youngsters, "Why are my parents so weird?" "Why such demands?" "Why...!?"

Through twenty years of clinical observation, consultation, and personal experience with immigrant families in the U.S. who are predominantly Chinese-Americans, the author has developed the notion that acculturation gap plays an important role in the relationship between first and second generations of immigrants. The purpose of this pilot study was to obtain some empirical data as a base for a more extensive research in the near future. The study was to compare Chinese-Americans parents' remarks with the second generation's opinion, to investigate if acculturation differences is associated with relationship problems. If acculturation differences could explain problematic relationships in recent immigrant families, principles and strategies could be developed to improve consultation and services for these families, some of whom are in confusion and distress, crying for help.

## Method

The subjects were 20 nine to sixteen years old Chinese-Americans, in a medium-sized city in the Mid-south. Most were born or grew up in America as second generation Chinese-Americans. A few were from families of recent arrivals. The subjects were selected on availability basis. They attended the Chinese church in the area with their parents or friends. The parents were the source of parental opinion, the informal data for this study. Parental comments were gathered mainly through consultation services provided by the investigator.

A 35-item questionnaire was administered to the second generation in April, 1997. The respondents checked the items on an anonymous basis. The instrument was modified from a questionnaire developed by Park (1995) and administered to 207 Korean-American youngsters in California to identify their needs based on their concerns, feelings, and thoughts. Responses of the current study were analyzed using descriptive statistics because of the small sample size, and to facilitate comparison with the Korean-American research results which were presented in percentages and rank orders.

## Results and Analysis

The results of this study were very comparable to the Korean study. Over 90% of the respondents indicate that they, the second generation Chinese-Americans, were happy living in the U.S.; they knew that their parents love them; and they were satisfied with their school life. However, a high percentage, between 70% to 90%, checked "yes" for the items of "I wish my parents could speak English well," "I wish my parents would understand how I feel," "I wish my parents would trust me," "I wish my parents would listen to me," "I wish my parents would stop criticizing me," and "I wish my parents would stop forcing me to do things that I do not want to do." Only 15% wanted to know more about China and its culture; and 15% revealed that they were afraid of going to school, wished that they were not Chinese; or their parents were not so Chinese. Demographic data indicate that the last three negative opinion were expressed by the children of the most recent immigrant families, where the parents were the least acculturated and the children tend to exhibit more adjustment problems in and outside of their homes.

On the other hand, the concerns most frequently expressed by parents were such as we do not understand enough of American school and educational system; our children do not respect their parents; our children do not like to converse with us; and our children do not know Chinese culture or values. They, though less frequently, admitted concerns about their children not able to go to a good college; however, few expressed concerns that they may be too busy to spend time with their children, and that their children may not have friends.

## Discussion and Implications

The investigation results indicate that overall, like the Korean-Americans, the second generation Chinese-Americans are happy and satisfied with their life in America: the country, their school and families. However, the results also suggest that some may have serious relationship difficulties with their parents. Most of the relationship problems can be traced to



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teen-aged respondents. One could dispose such phenomenon as ordinary "generation gap" between young people and their parents regardless of ethnicity and immigration background. However, there are obvious and subtle indication of acculturation problems. The dissatisfaction with parents' English proficiency is a clear example of the former. Parents' ability to communicate in English could be the reason why "our children do not like to converse with us," as observed by parents. Another obvious example is the low number of children wanting to learn more about China and its culture, in stark contrast with parents' recurrent concern that their children do not know Chinese culture and values.

The not so obvious indicators of acculturation differences are the "I wish my parent would..." items. This investigator could supplement children' response from her frequent interaction with the families. For example, a child's "I wish my parents would stop forcing me to do things that I do not want to do" could very well be complemented with "such as going to Chinese language school, practicing one or more musical instruments, studying hard to excel in academics, to adhering to Chinese virtues of being modest and thrifty." Meanwhile, parents' could be driven, again, by their cultural values and their desire that their offsprings would know and adhere to Chinese culture and values, the system they are familiar and were brought up with. This may also explain why parent feel that their children do not respect their parents. Beyond the fact that they "do not understand enough of American school and educational system," they do not that respect for elders is not stressed in this land. In addition to not being taught to respect elders by all means, children do not find their parents' attitude and demeanor being practiced and thus the norm in mainstream society. No wonder their parents find them disrespectful and non-communicative.

Parents' unfamiliarity with American values is again reflected by their stronger concern over their children's academic achievement, but little or no concerns that they would spend time with their children, or that their children have social needs, such as friends. Fewer than one-third of the children said their parents would help them with school work, while over two-third wished their parents would listen to them. This situation could be the results of immigrant parents having to work hard to earn a living, including to maintain their position in institute of higher education through productivity and scholastic performance. Therefore, even though Chinese parents value education, they may not have the time and the know-how to assist their children with school work. They would have much less time and energy to worry about their children' social needs, which are not significant in the Chinese value system.

The distance and misunderstanding between parent and child are often more drastic in new immigrant families. The parents are less acculturated in these families; while their children have to undergo rapid acculturation in order to fit in the school culture, and thus having more adjustment problems negotiating between family and school expectations. It is therefore not surprising that all of the extreme negative opinion about their culture and ethnic identity recorded in this research came from the children of recent immigrant families.

Educators have voiced concerns over the needs of the rapidly increasing number of immigrant and culturally diverse families in the U.S. (Fong & Feldman, 1995; Holman, 1997; Little Soldier, 1997; McAdoo, 1993; Rioux & Berla, 1993; Valdes, 1996). Holman (1997) called

for school personnel to develop strategies to facilitate the adaptation of Hispanic immigrant parents and children in the school systems. Likewise, this pilot study is driven by the perceived needs of another group of immigrants, the Chinese-Americans. It seems that acculturation gap is a critical factor in parent-child relationship which could have strong impact on immigrant children's adjustment in school and at home. More rigorous research on acculturation problems are worthwhile. Educators and professionals in the helping services could benefit from research findings to develop effective ways to serve these families; and America will gain from the contributions that fulfilled, appreciative and vigorous immigrants will bring.

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QUESTIONNAIRE FOR YOUNG CHINESE-AMERICANS

My age is _____ I am in _____ Grade

I am a Boy ___ Girl ___ I was born in the U.S.A. Yes ___ No ___

My father's work _____ My mother's work _____

Please check (✓) one blank for each sentence. We are trying to understand Chinese-American children like you. Please help us by thinking over each sentence carefully, and check the blank (YES, NO, or SOMETIMES) that is most true for you.

| | YES | NO | SOMETIMES |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I have many friends at school..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 2. Other children at school like me..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 3. I am happy at school..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 4. I am not happy with my school work..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 5. I do not like to go to school..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| (because_____) | | | |
| 6. I have difficulty learning at school..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 7. I am afraid of going to school..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| (because_____) | | | |
| 8. I know some children in my school who take drugs.... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 9. My teachers like me..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 10. I worry about going to college..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 11. English is too difficult for me..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 12. My parents often help me with my school work..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 13. My parents are too busy to spend time with me..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 14. My parents praise me for doing well at school..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 15. My parents love me..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 16. I feel proud of my family..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 17. I wish my parents would stop criticizing me..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 18. I wish my parents would understand how I feel..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 19. I wish my parents would trust me..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 20. I wish my parents were not so Chinese..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 21 I wish my parents would stop comparing me with my sister or brother or other children..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 22. I wish my parents would pay more attention to me.... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 23. I wish my parents would listen to me..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 24. I wish my parents would stop forcing me to do things that I do not want to do..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 25. I wish my parents were not so strict (with unreasonable rules, curfew, etc.)..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 26. I wish my parents could speak English well..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 27. I am happy living in the United States of America... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 28. I am healthy and happy..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 29. I love my parents..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 30. I like to know more about China and its culture..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 31. I wish I have at least a true friend..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 32. I wish I am not Chinese..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 33. My parents are proud of me..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 34. My family loves me just as I am..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |
| 35. I feel I belong to my school class..... | ___ | ___ | _____ |

Write one wish that is most important to you:

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